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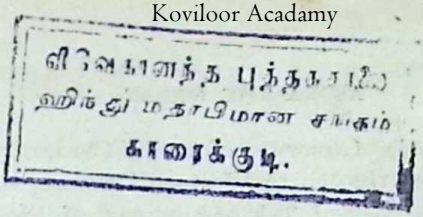

ASOKA THE GREAT

Asoka is not merely the greatest emperor of India. His name stands foremost among the famous monarchs of the world's history.

"Amidst the tens of thousands of monarchs that crowd the columns of history," says H. G. Wells in his monumental *History of the World*, "amidst their majesties, graciousnesses, serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Asoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star. From the Volga to Japan, his name is still honoured. China, Tibet and India preserve the tradition of his greatness. More living men cherish his memory to-day than have ever heard the names of Constantine and Charlemagne."

"It is not every age, it is not every nation," remarks another great historian, "that can produce a king of this type and Emperor Asoka still remains without a parallel in the history of the world."

Asoka was the grandson of Chandragupta, the first great emperor of India who consolidated Aryavarta with the aid of the peerless statesmanship of Chanakya. His father, Bimbisara, handed him the mighty empire with all its noble traditions well preserved.

Even at a tender age Asoka was known to his future subjects as a remarkable prince. Chandragupta had discerned in him qualities of greatness and the young prince was well trained in the arts of war and peace. Bimbisara and his ministers also recognized his merits and according to Aryan traditions, crowned him as the *Yuvaraj*, superseding his elder brothers. Asoka soon proved that the choice was happy. He

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reaped laurels as the Governor of two of the largest provinces of the Empire—of the North Western Province whose capital was the historic seat of Taksha-sila, and of Western India whose capital was the equally famous city of Ujjain.

In his early youth, though noted for his wise administration, his main pre-occupation seems to have been war and hunting, in both of which he excelled. It was while he was at Ujjain that news came of his father's death and he hurried to the Imperial capital.

Meanwhile, according to the tradition, one of his brothers, Susima by name, had usurped the throne. But the ministers and most of the populace sided with Asoka and a bloody battle was fought in which the hostile faction was completely defeated. The same story has it that Asoka wreaked cruel vengeance on his brother and on all those of his kin who had sided with the rebel prince.

Impartial historians, however, discount these versions as malicious stories invented by Brahminical writers, to break the mighty spell which the name of the sacred Buddhist emperor had on the imagination of the people.

The Great Heritage

"Traditions affirm," says Professor Majumdar, "that he was cruel and blood-thirsty, and waded to the throne through the blood of his ninety brothers. These cannot be regarded as sober facts of history, and must be dismissed as pure fiction. Asoka was formally consecrated four years after his accession to the throne, and this is the only fact, at present known, which lends some colour to the theory of a disputed succession at the death of Bindusara."

The year 269 B.C. saw the crowning of Asoka publicly as the emperor. He had inherited a vast empire, which embraced the whole of India with the addition of the modern Afghanistan and Persia. Only the three Tamil kingdoms in the

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south were not brought under the Imperial banner. And Asoka did not extend the empire much. In fact, the only war in which he was engaged was against the formidable kingdom of Kalinga.

And that war proved a turning point in his life and had far-reaching reactions in shaping the destiny of not only India's history but of the whole world. For out of that was born the torch of Buddhist light, which Asoka carried to the farthest ends of the then known world.

Kalinga was a powerful kingdom in the south, situated on the east coast of Madras between the rivers Krishna, Godavari and Mahanadi. It had a valiant king, a first-class military leader, with a well-organized army, who defied every attempt of Chandragupta to bring it under his flag.

When Asoka invaded Kalinga he was met with stout opposition. The campaign lasted fierce and long. The soldiers of Kalinga fought to the last with courage and heroism, but they could not for long withstand the terrific onslaught of the Imperial army, backed as it was with the resources of a vast and well-organized empire. The Kalinga forces were routed in the end, more than a lakh of heroic soldiers were slain and Asoka captured 150,000 prisoners, thousands of elephants and chariots, and other spoils of war. The territory was annexed to the Magadhan empire and Asoka realized the long-cherished dream of conquest, for which his illustrious grandfather had so long striven in vain.

Sublime Renunciation

It was a splendid military success, but Asoka was in no way elated. The sweeping victory, which would have brought unbounded joy to most monarchs, filled his heart with remorse. His thoughts were centered not on victory bouts and feasts of celebration, but on the poor prostrate thousands over whom he had trampled past to triumph. He thought not of the

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fame and glory he had won, but of the carnage he had wrought, of the horrors of the war, and his heart bled for the misery of the defeated people. In the hour of supreme triumph and glory, the Imperial victor, the mighty monarch of the greatest empire ever seen on this land, shed tears of sorrow. History has not witnessed a nobler scene, a loftier and more sublime act of renunciation. In the words of H. G. Wells, he is the only military monarch on record, who abandoned warfare after victory.

"Thus arose His Sacred Majesty's remorse for having conquered the Kalingas," declares Asoka in the edicts he had engraved on imperishable rocks, "because the conquest of a country previously unconquered involves the slaughter, death and carrying away as captives of the people. That is a matter of profound sorrow and regret to His Majesty.

"There is, however, another reason for His Majesty feeling still more regretful, inasmuch as in such a country dwell Brahmans or ascetics, or men of various denominations, or householders who are non-combatants. To such people in such a country befalls violence, or slaughter or separation from their loved ones. Or, misfortune befalls the friends, acquaintances, comrades and relatives of those who are themselves well protected, while their affection is undiminished. Thus for them also it is a mode of violence."

The Torch-Bearer

And it is no wonder that such an ineffacable feeling of remorse for those whom his war had slaughtered drove him into the folds of Buddhism, one of whose cardinal doctrines is *Ahimsa* or non-injury to the tiniest of living creatures. And with Asoka's conversion, Buddhism became not only the State religion of the vast sub-Continent, but attained the status of the first great religion whose noble message was spread to the farthest corners of the earth.

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More than two hundred years had passed since the sacred Prince of the Sakyas saw the Light under the Bodi tree and gave the world his Eight-Fold Path as a panacea to all the ills of humanity, as the way to *Nirvana*—eternal bliss. And ever since, the new religion had grown with leaps and bounds. In the reign of Chandragupta and Bimbisara, it had flourished side by side with Brahminism and the new cult of Jainism. But it was left to Asoka to become the torch-bearer of Buddhism, and "to lead the holy light from village to village, from city to city, from province to province, from country to country, and from continent to continent, till at last three continents drank the nectar of bliss, thanks to the super-human energy and undying zeal of the immortal son of Bimbisara."

The monk who won the emperor to the Buddhist fold is recorded as Upagupta, and later he accompanied Asoka on his pilgrimages to the various sacred places of Buddhistic worship.

Undying Monuments

And having seen the Light for himself, Asoka set about to share it with his subjects. He gave up hunting and other pastimes of pleasure and started on tours of pilgrimage. Wherever he went, he preached the *Dharma*, and organized religious discussions and did everything in his power to spread the new gospel by his own personal example.

But by far the most unique and novel means of propagating the message of the Master which Asoka employed was by the rock edicts. These are engravings carved on numerous rocks, pillars and caves throughout his vast dominions. Many of them have been lost, but over thirty have been discovered. They contain a glowing personal narrative of the emperor and give a detailed account of the *Dharma* and of what Asoka did to bring it home to the millions of his subjects. Some are admonitions to the State officials, but all are personal

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appeals to the people to lead a pure and simple life. More than two thousand years have passed since those words were carved on living rocks and imperishable stones, but to this day they stand not only as reliable records of history, but as an undying monument to the purity of his life and sublimity of his thoughts.

From these records it is known that for about three years he remained a lay disciple and that in the eleventh year of his reign he joined the Buddhist Sangha.

In the eighth edict, he records his formal conversion and lays out for himself the royal path along which a follower of Buddha, should go. Tours of pilgrimage, reverence and protection of sacred and holy men, the welfare of the country and people and the proclamation of the enlightened *Dharma*—these he placed before himself as the foremost of royal duties.

Rights of Animal Subjects

And it is interesting to note that the aspects of Buddhism which he emphasized were more humanitarian and moral than religious. " He never discussed metaphysical doctrines, nor referred to God or soul, but simply asked people to have control over their passions, to cultivate purity of life and character in inmost thoughts, to be tolerant to other religions, to abstain from killing or injuring animals, to have regard for them, to be charitable to all, to behave with decorum to parents, teachers, relatives, friends and ascetics, to treat servants and dependants kindly, and above all, to tell the truth."

And the great emperor set a good example by scrupulously adhering to these principles in his daily life. He gave up hunting, which was the traditional pastime of the Aryan princes and gave up meat-eating. At Pataliputra animal sacrifices were forbidden and even fish were not allowed to be sold on certain sacred days.

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He embarked on a vast scheme of public works for the benefit of his subjects. Spacious roads were built throughout the vast empire, planted with shady trees on both sides. Avenues and fruit gardens sprang up everywhere and numberless rest-houses for the weary travellers were built throughout the country. Tanks and wells were dug up and a vast system of medical relief by which not only the sick and needy of his human subjects were duly cared for, but even the animal subjects received proper medical attention. The central Government laid special stress on the cultivation of medical plants and the efficient distribution of medicines and insisted that animals also were entitled to these benefits as much as human beings.

Asoka encouraged his people to approach him directly. And to ensure that their appeals were promptly heard and public grievances remedied without delay, the Emperor proclaimed that thereafter, there shall be no fixed hours to conduct such business in the Court.

For the Common Weal

"At all times and all places," records the Emperor in the sixth edict, "whether I am dining or in the ladies' apartments, in my bedroom or in the closet, in my carriage or in the palace gardens, the official reporters should keep me constantly informed of the people's business, which I am ready to dispose of at any place. And further, if any difficulty should arise in the bestowal of the imperial bounty or in the execution of orders, through disputes arising in the agency entrusted with them, it is His Majesty's command that immediate report should be made to me at any hour, and at any place. For, work I must for the common weal."

For the avoidance of the bureaucratic tyranny inevitable in such a vast country Asoka framed special measures. The instructions he had issued to his high officers were carved

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in huge pillars of rocks and set up in the farthest corners of the dominions. And at all public festivals and provincial Assemblies which were held every three or five years, he commanded that these instructions should be regularly read to the people so that they might understand the orders.

To the high officers entrusted with the supervision of towns, districts and provinces, he says :—

" It is your sacred duty to regard all men as the Emperor's children, whose happiness in this world and the next is his chief desire. You should be careful in your conduct, for those who neglect their duty would gain neither the favour of Heaven nor of the Emperor. It is your chief duty to see that no innocent man is made to suffer, to prevent false imprisonment, the unjustifiable torture of citizens and any acts of violence. In your behaviour you should avoid envy, harshness, impatience, idleness and lack of perseverance. For, these are faults which make one unfit to occupy the positions of useful State officials."

No Cheap Proselytization

Most of the edicts are direct appeals to his subjects to cooperate with the emperor in his efforts to establish the *Dharma*. " Even the small man," the mighty emperor suggests, " can, if he chooses, by exertion win for himself much heavenly bliss." He stresses the elementary moral codes and enjoins all his subjects to conform to the Good Law, by which every one might gain peace of mind, joy in this life and the life hereafter.

But Asoka was no fanatic. Never for once did he employ the cheap tricks of proselytization, with which the modern world has been made so very familiar. Nor did he encourage Buddhism at the expense of other religions. Toleration to other sects was the rock on which his whole missionary zeal was founded.

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"The ceremony of the *Dharma*, is not temporal," he declares in one of the edicts. "If it fails to attain the desired end in this world, it surely begets eternal merit in the other world."

"But a man," he warns, "must reverence all sects and never think that he honours his own by disparaging that of another man for trivial reasons. All sects deserve reverence for one reason or another. By thus acting, a man exalts his own sect, and at the same time does service to the sects of other people. His Majesty cares not so much for donations or external reverence as there should be a growth of the essence of the matter in all sects."

Ahimsa Enthroned

In the twenty-seventh year of his accession, Asoka proclaimed a special decree for the protection of birds and animals. Parrots, doves, ducks, pigeons and geese, bulls, stags rhinoceroses, squirrels, tortoises, lizards and queen-ants were not to be killed. She-goats and ewes, sows with young and their young upto six months and all four-footed animals which were not eaten by man were exempt from slaughter. He strictly enjoined people not to burn forests—"not even chaff containing living things." The living were not to be fed on the living, he declared, and ordered that fish ought not to be caught or sold on certain days. Destruction of animals in elephant preserves or fishing ponds entailed severe penalties. The branding of horses and oxen, and the castration of cattle were expressly forbidden. Thus was *Ahimsa* enthroned in Asoka's reign as it was never before, or since; in the history of of the whole world.

Another special creation of Asoka's was the appointment of officers to see that "justice was done and to minister to the spiritual and temporal needs of his subjects." These were more or less monitors and censors of the *Dharma* whose duty it was to be constantly touring the country, to prevent wrong-

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ful punishment, to hear the grievance of the people in the outlying parts of the empire and to remove the hindrance from the path of the faithful. These *Parishad* officers were entrusted with the Imperial bounty and the administration of the numerous charitable institutions. They inquired into individual cases of distress, and helped parents with large families and people in distress through old age or misfortune with generous funds from the Imperial purse set apart for charity. Their supervision included not only the Sangha and the members of its order, but also of the other religious sects. Their duties also included the inspection of female establishment of the members of the Imperial family both at the Imperial capital and at the various provincial centres.

Missions to Foreign Courts

Not content with propagating the *Dharma* to his own subjects, Asoka sent ministers to foreign countries. He also despatched medical missions to Ceylon and to the courts of the three Tamil kingdoms in the south. And far beyond the seas, to the courts of foreign monarchs also special parties of missionaries were despatched—to Macedonia and Epirus, to the courts of Antiochus Theos, the grandson of Selukos with whom Chandragupta had contracted an alliance, and to Ptolemy Philadelphus of Egypt.

And from time to time Asoka recorded with satisfaction the progress of the *Dharma*. "I don't claim to preach any new doctrine" he declared, "but only the ancient standard of living which leads to the length of days. The kings who had ruled the land before, had also desired that men should live according to the *Dharma*, but had failed to persuade them. But His Majesty had both by personal example and State measures induced men to obey the law, and now the *Dharma* is growing and is increased in strength by good and gentle living."

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"There is greater piety among men," records the Imperial sage with satisfaction. "Cruelty to animate creatures have diminished and there is less slaughter of living beings, while even in the lands outside the empire, where the Greek king named Antiochus dwells and beyond that Antiochus, to where dwell the four kings of Egypt, Macedonia and Epirus, and in the south, the kings of the Cholas and Pandyas and of Ceylon . . . . . everywhere men follow the *Dharma* as proclaimed by His Majesty."

And the instructions issued to these envoys, remarks Professor Adolf Waley, furnish perhaps the most convincing proofs of the greatness and breadth of mind of Asoka and of his sincere desire to be a benefactor to mankind in general. "The Missionaries are to intermingle among all unbelievers for the spread of the religion; they shall mix equally with soldiers, Brahmins and beggars, with the dreaded and the despised, both within the kingdom and foreign countries teaching better things." Conversion, however, is to be purely by persuasion, and never by the sword.

Work for the Aboriginals

And even to those despised forest tribes who had so long remained outside the pale of Aryan law and society, the emperor's zeal and sympathy went. He despatched special medical missions to administer to their needs. And lay brothers drawn from the agricultural castes were drafted on to these parties so that the Aboriginals might be taught the better cultivation of the land.

"Through the instructions imparted to them by the agriculturist brethren," records one historian, "the half savage tribesmen learnt the means to earn an honest livelihood instead of subsisting, as hitherto, upon the proceeds of raids made upon their more civilized Aryan neighbours. Finally,

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Buddhist nuns improved the lot of the totally uneducated female portion of the tribes by teaching them the blessings of cleanliness in the care of their children and in their houses generally."

In South India and Burma, Buddhism made many new converts, but the biggest triumph of Asoka's missionaries was in Ceylon. Tradition has it that it was Mahendra, Asoka's own brother, who converted the monarch of Ceylon. Mahendra and one of his sisters, Sangamitra, had both joined the Buddhist Sangha and were devoted preachers. First they established a monastery at Tanjore and from there proceeded to Ceylon. Devanampiya Tissa, the reigning monarch, received the missionaries with royal honours. And after the due presentation of letters from the Imperial Court, Mahendra was invited to preach the doctrines of Buddhism before the king. Mahendra's eloquence produced such an overwhelming impression that the Singhalese King and 6000 of his Court immediately accepted Buddhism. Within a few years the whole of Ceylon adopted the Aryan path. Soon a second mission, headed by Princess Sangamitra with a party of nuns, arrived carrying two sacred relics—the collar-bone of the Buddha and a branch of the Bo Tree from Buddha Gaya, which is preserved to this day in the island.

Great Democratic Ruler

And then it was that Asoka achieved the most unique honour in history—of winning the allegiance of an independent sovereign not by the sword, but by the greatness of his personality. The King of Ceylon, who was till now an independent monarch, was so much impressed by the greatness of Asoka that of his own accord, he declared allegiance to the emperor and accepted his suzerainty. In the presence of the Ambassadors of the Indian Emperor, King Devanampiya was re-crowned in a solemn manner as a vassal of Asoka.

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Tradition also affirms that Asoka convoked the Third General Council of Buddhist divines to settle internal differences.

Asoka was using, sums up an English historian, the whole organization of a vast empire—and a very perfect one, —which in the hands of Chandragupta and Chanakya had been so powerful as a political and economic machine, not for oppression or extortion, but solely for the purpose of educating the masses. And if he exercised his authority in an autocratic manner hardly in consonance with Aryan traditions of kingship, there is every probability that he had behind him the enthusiastic support of the great majority of his subjects. The times were ripe for a great democratic movement in religious thought. The Aryan pale included so many of non-Aryan race that the monopoly in spiritual leadership which the twice-born classes asserted, could no longer be maintained, though the intellectual impetus came from the great minds of Aryan aristocracy in both cases. Buddhism and Jainism were essentially democratic movements and Asoka, in putting himself at the head of the one and extending State patronage to the other, made himself a great popular leader, while he disarmed the hostility of the Brahmin priesthood by his tolerant attitude towards all religious sects.

Landmark in World's History

"His appeal was direct—to the masses. He carefully avoided any metaphysical doctrines which the learned Brahman might try to controvert. The order for Brahman, Sudra and for those outside the Aryan pale was the same: 'Strive to do good to all living creatures—that is sufficient for your salvation in this world and the next.' In thus making the supreme power of the State identical with the moral law, Asoka's reign was not only one of the greatest epochs of Indian culture, but a conspicuous land-mark in the history of civilization."

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Of the far-reaching achievements of Asoka's reign, the same authority says: "Apart from its effect in breaking down the racial barriers and making India a nation, Asoka's propaganda had the most far-reaching social and cultural influence. The Kshatriya and Brahman aristocracy had been meat-eaters and addicted to drink—the intoxicating *soma* juice. There is little to show how far the habits of the ancient Aryans had been changed in this respect by their Indian environment before Asoka's time, but the powerful influence of a highly centralised Government during a period of thirty-eight years and the restriction of slaughter of animals must have done much to form the tradition of vegetarian food and non-alcoholic drinking which became the rule of the upper classes of Hindu society. And the predominance of Buddhist thought in the universities of the land must have had an equal influence in substituting scientific investigation of cause and effect for a blind acceptance of scriptural authority."

R. G.

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